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ABSTRACT

The Open University of the United Kingdom is acknowledged as the most successful distance education program yet designed. High among the reasons for its success is the student support service provided by the Regional Tutorial Services, a department of the Open University administrative structure which has received little acclaim. This paper shows how the Regional Tutorial Services copes with the problem of dropouts that has been a feature of many other distance education programs and how it seeks to provide a valid educational balance for those enrolled. Three phases in the evolution of the present administrative system are analyzed and various aspects of the 1979 structure are discussed. Attention is drawn to developments in computer recording which may enable Regional Tutorial Services to forecast possible dropouts and thus take a major step towards eliminating avoidable student withdrawal. (8 references) (Author)

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ZIEF-PAPIERE 36

Desmond J. Keegan

The Regional Tutorial Services of the Open University: a case study

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ABSTRACT

The Open University of the United Kingdom is acknowledged as the most successful distance education system yet designed. High among the reasons for its success is the student support service provided by the Regional Tutorial Services, a department of the Open University administrative structure which has received little acclaim. This paper shows how the Regional Tutorial Services copes with the problem of drop-outs that has been a feature of many other distance systems and how it seeks to provide a valid educational experience for those enrolled. Three phases in the evolution of the present administrative system are analysed and various aspects of the 1979 structure are discussed. Attention is drawn to developments in computer recording which may enable the Regional Tutorial Services to forecast possible drop-outs and thus take a major step towards eliminating avoidable student withdrawal.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Charter of the Open University (OU) at Milton Keynes, England, was granted on 23 April 1969 and in 1979 it celebrated its 10th anniversary. It is already regarded as one of the most successful developments in higher education in the 1970s and its success has given the possibility of new status to distance education throughout the world.

The achievements of the OU are well known. It has carried out its mandate of teaching by correspondence at university level to students for whom there is no entry qualification. In 1979 no less than 60,000 students were studying for a degree. 42% of the 1979 intake had not matriculated and would therefore not have been qualified for other British universities. By 31 December 1978 over 32,000 students had already graduated with their B.A. (Open) degree. An average of 75% of students complete each course for which they are enrolled. Of the first (1971) cohort of 19,581 students 54,3% had graduated by 31 December 1978 and 3,000 were still studying: this makes nonsense of the forecast made by sceptics in the late '60s that no more than 10% of those enrolled could gain a degree by correspondence. Since 1977 a further education stream with 20,000 non-degree enrolements has been added to the OU's operations. This is an impressive record.

Of the many factors which contribute to the OU's success this paper seeks to highlight one which has received little acclaim: the Regional Tutorial Services (RTS). Central to any distance education system is the link which is provided between the learning materials that are developed by the institution and the learning that is to take place therefrom. In the OU system this linking is provided by the RTS. It would be difficult to overestimate the contribution which this service has made to the OU's success.

This paper presents an analysis of the Regional Tutorial Services under three headings:history, present provision and critique, with an introductory section on documentation.

2. DOCUMENTATION

There are four basic sources for an analysis of the Open University:

- The University Charter 1969
- The Report of the Planning Committee to the Secretary of State for Education and Science 1969
- The Report of the Committee on Continuing Education 1976
- Lord Perry, The Open University 1977

The early history of the RTS is undocumented and can only be pieced together from the minutes of the early meetings of the University's senate. These are not generally available but some analysis of them is provided by D. Sewart and M. Richardson, Counselling and advisory services for adult learners: an Open University perspective, International Journal of Education, 1975, pp. 425-437.

There are two documents (one a revision of the other) in which the OU sets forth its philosophy of teaching at a distance:

- D. Grougeon (ed.), Teaching by Correspondence in the Open University, 1973
- S. Clenell, J. Peters, D. Sewart, Teaching for the Open University, 1977

The OU prepares annually a series of publications for members of the RTS and students:

- Handbook for Part-Time Tutorial and Counselling Staff 1979
- Further Information for Part-Time Staff 1979
- How to Study 1979
- B.A. Degree Handbook 1979
- Associate Student Handbook 1979

The RTS publishes an authoritative journal Teaching at a Distance which carries articles on the theory and practice of teaching at the OU. An excellent analysis of articles published in the first

nine volumes 1974-1977 is given by J.S. Daniel and C. Marquis, 'Interaction and Independence: Getting the Mixture Right', Teaching at a Distance, 15, 29-44.

The policies of the RTS and an evaluation of its effectiveness have been presented in a number of articles including:

- R.H. Beevers, The Function of the Part-Time Academic Staff in the OU Teaching System, Teaching at a Distance, No. 3, 1975, p. 11ff.
- D. Sewart, Possibilities of Optimizing the Organization of Studies in Distance Study Systems in the Light of the Learning Situation of the Students, Council of Europe, 1975, CCE/ESR 75.40.
- D. Sewart & M. Richardson, art. cit., 1975.
- D. Sewart, Continuity of Concern for Students in a System of Learning at a Distance, Zentrales Institut für Fernstudienforschung, ZIFF Papiere 22, Hagen, Fernuniversität, 1978.
- M. Thorpe, A Report on the Student Special Support Scheme for New Undergraduates, Open University: Regional and Tutorial Services, 1978.
- D. Sewart, Academic Support and Guidance for Individuals in a Distance Learning System, in Proceedings of 11th ICCE Conference, New Delhi, 1978.
- D. Sewart, Advice and Preparation in the Open University in the 1980s. Adult Education, Vol. 51, No. 6, 346-351, 1979.
- M. Thorpe, The student special support scheme, Teaching at a Distance, 15, 1-14, 1979.
- D. Sewart, Creating an information base for an individualized support system in distance education. Distance Education, Vol 1, No. 2, 171-187, 1980.

An indispensable source of information is discussion with students, part-time OU staff and members of the RTS on their experiences working within the OU system.

3. HISTORY

The Report of the Planning Committee (1969: 44) gives the original planning of the tutorial services of the OU. It is a defensive document:

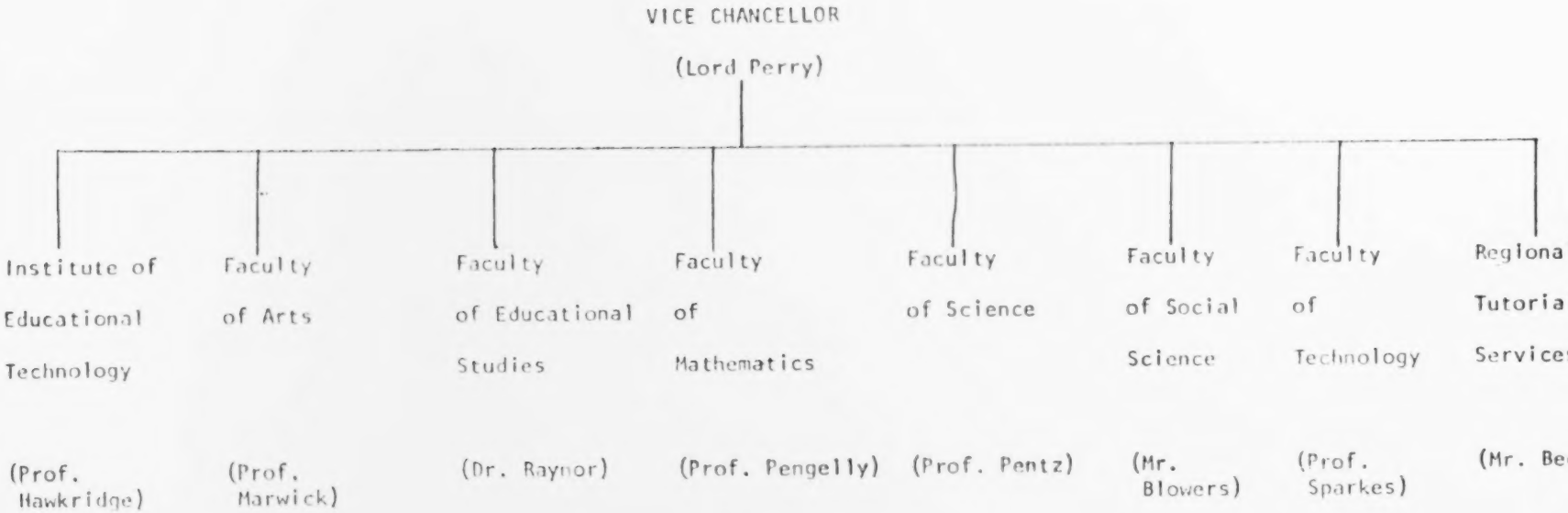
> The whole concept of part-time higher education, of the acquisition of degrees by correspondence courses supplemented by broadcast teaching, was sufficiently revolutionary to have led to considerable scepticism in the academic world and among the lay public.

One does not have to inquire very far to realise that the basis for the scepticism was the known drop-out rate in existing correspondence institutions, both public and private, prior to 1969. In fact a number of articles published in the *Times Educational Supplement* at the time forecast an OU drop-out rate of 85% based on evidence from English and Scandinavian institutions.

Typical of the early criticism is:

> But what would happen in a university of the air? The numbers attracted to it would certainly be out of all proportion to the numbers that stayed in the course. Can we really afford the fantastic cost that this would entail? The government give no estimate. It is just as well. This is one of those grandiose schemes that does not bear inspection while so much else that is already begun remains half done. We shall need to be very sure that it is necessary before we commit ourselves to the expense.
> (The Times Educational Supplement, 1966).

The Planning Committee's answer to the drop-out problem was to create two units of the new university, (each of them equal in importance to the normal academic faculties) specially to deal with the problems of teaching at a distance: 'Home Tuition and Correspondence Services' and 'Local Centres and Tutorial Services'. These two units were quickly renamed the 'Institute of Educational Technology' and the 'Regional Tutorial Services' and have remained integral parts of the OU ever since, as the 1979 organizational chart shows:



Open University Organisational Chart 1979

Figure 1

The earliest thinking on the role and structure of the RTS is given in paragraph 51 of the Report of the Planning Committee.Three points seem to be of importance:

- (it) will provide the link between the central office and the regions.
- Because ... of the 'open-ness' of the University, and the possibility that many students may wish to enrol who are not at a stage when they could profitably pursue degree studies, we consider the development of the counselling services to be of particular importance.
- It will ... be the means by which the University can reduce to a minimum the number of students who embark upon courses only to find that they cannot continue with them.

These three themes: the presence of the OU in the regions, the importance of profitable access and the reduction of drop-outs, appear constantly in what follows.

From its inception in 1971 to its present operation the RTS has evolved through three phases (1971, 1972-1975, 1976-).

1971

The first phase saw the University trying to provide an ambitious programme of three tutorial persons for each student enrolled: a counsellor, a correspondence tutor and a class tutor. This phase lasted only one academic year.

The Planning Committee had left the implementation of its proposals outlined above to the first staff appointed to the new University and some of the planning and philosophy of the years 1969-1971 can be found in the presentation of the director of the RTS, R.H.Beevers:

> Adult education experience suggests that at least 50% of a given student's needs are not strictly related to the subject in hand. That is not to say that his needs are solely psychological and unconnected with the content of study; the help he needs is of an educational kind, even of an academic kind, but not strictly subject based. It becomes possible therefore to conceive of a function for the counsellor which is totally related to the whole tutorial process. (1975: 11)

Thus from the beginning the students' relationship to a locally based counsellor was seen as the basis of the University's relationship with its students.

The problem here, which is fundamental to the organisation of a distance education system, is that if the counsellors were to be local to the students they could not take on the role of correspondence tutors. This is because tutors, on account of their diverse specialisations and the dispersal of the student body, could not be expected to live near the students. (The OU cannot provide tutors on M334, an advanced Mathematics course with low enrolments, in every part of Britain.)

If the correspondence tutors were to be specialists in their discipline and take on, in addition, the mantle of counsellors, they could not provide local continuity as educational advisors to the student throughout his undergraduate career since their specialisation was relevant only to one part of the students' career at the University. (An excellent correspondence tutor on D282 Macroeconomics may be of no help to a student on D303 Cognitive Psychology, and that may be the student's next choice.)

So the OU entered its first year 1971 with three distinct persons assisting the student:

(1) the correspondence tutor, who marked assignments, commented on them, kept records of progress and lived anywhere throughout Britain.
(2) the counsellor, for whom many roles were outlined: contact and encouragement, study problems, personal and social problems, study centres, student meetings, group discussions, availability of resources, remedial help, keeping records, contacting students unable to visit study centres, preventing drop-outs, guiding students in their study programmes.
(3) the class tutor, who gave face-to-face tutorials to groups of students in the local study centres. They too were subject specialists and lived in the same regions as the students.

It did not work. 40,817 applied for enrolment, 24,220 accepted places offered them and by April 1971, three months after the academic year had started, 19,581 were still studying. The numbers

were too vast. The three-tiered tutorial/counselling system was too impractical. It was too hard to keep information about the progress of individual students moving amongst the various people involved. There were many academics doing two or more of the functions but for different students.

1972 - 1975

The system was radically changed for the 1972 intake by amalgamating the class tutor and correspondence tutor into one person - the course tutor.

In the system in vigour from 1972 until the end of the 1975 academic year the student was related to two persons: the counsellor and the course tutor.

The course tutor marked assignments (TMAs) and provided face-to-face tutorials for both foundation course and post-foundation course students.

The role of the counsellor was reorganised and he was given a 'defined tutorial role'. Each student from 1972 onwards was allocated to a counsellor when he registered for a foundation course. This allocation was made on the basis of the counsellor's subject interests and he was given a 'defined tutorial role' in relation to the subject of one foundation course. This gave the counsellor a continuing and local contact with a group of students for the length of their studies at the OU. In his tutorial role he was seen as concentrating on the method of study in a particular foundation course (problems of study at a distance, development of autonomy, use of broadcasts, allocation of time), whereas the detailed subject matter was the province of the course tutor.

Dr. David Sewart, Assistant Director of RTS, comments:

> We might say that the defined tutorial role of the counsellor was to make himself redundant with regard to his specialist course knowledge in the course of the foundation year. In sum, the principal function of the defined tutorial role which operated at foundation level only, was to promote as rapidly as possible habits and techniques of study which were both effective for and appropriate to the multi-media teaching system which the OU employs. (1978: 9)

These changes, introduced quickly for the 1972 intake when the first year's system proved unwieldy, did not solve the problem or bring about consensus within the OU. In April 1972 an internal committee was set up at the OU (Review Committee on Tuition and Counselling) to analyse the whole relationship of tutoring and counselling. A memorandum from the Vice-Chancellor, Sir W. Perry, sums up the problem:

> The issue on which the University is divided is whether one person can carry out the two roles of personal counsellor and course tutor. This problem is partly logistical, i.e. a personal counsellor must be local to be accessible to the student, whereas a course tutor is not necessarily so accessible and indeed on the higher level courses may not even reside within the same region as the student. The problem is seen, however, by the protagonists of the two points of view, as primarily educational. It is said that both counselling and tuition are novel modes of teaching which, to be carried out effectively by part-timers whose professional work outside the University is of a traditional kind, must be separated. Furthermore it is argued that a student needs a person (the counsellor) who is not trammelled by the obligation of the course tutor to pass judgement upon him academically by means of assessment. On the other hand, it is argued that counselling can be more effective if the person carrying out that function has a close knowledge of the student's academic course work and conversely that tuition can benefit if the tutor has a close knowledge of the student personally. (OU internal memorandum, 17 January 1974)

1976 - Present

After extensive debate within the Open University a new system was devised and brought into operation in January 1976 for the 1976 intake of students. As this is the system which is to all intents and purposes in existence today it is worth presenting the official recommendation:

1.1 From 1976 the University should base its policy in two part-time appointments: tutor-counsellors and course tutors.

1.2 The tutor-counsellor should have full counselling responsibility for an average of twenty-five students (after final registration) who would be following a variety of courses. The nucleus of the group of twenty-five would be a smaller group of approximately ten students, following a common foundation course, and for these ten he would provide, in addition to counselling,

correspondence and class tuition. The Committee wishes to emphasise very strongly that in combining the course tuition and counselling functions at Foundation level in this manner, it is clearly essential that the two functions continue to be carried out in their full specification.

1.3 The course tutor would provide the correspondence and other tuition for a group of students following a post-Foundation course: the average ratio of students to tutors at post-Foundation level would be improved to 16:1 (after final registration).
(Sewart, 1978: 11)

There are reasons of an educational, financial and political nature which led to these decisions and the present structure of the RTS. Well before 1976 there had been a tendency to link counsellors to students in their own discipline: thus it had become almost normative for Social Science students to be allocated to Social Science counsellors and this role had become in effect discipline-based. This seems to be a valid educational development.

There were financial and political reasons too, the basic one being the decision to move money and teacher-student contact time to post-foundation level students at the expense of foundation level students. One effect of the decision in teacher-student contact hours was to reduce from 35 to 20 the number of possible tutorial contact meetings per student per annum.

In this way the linking of the students' learning with the learning materials which are sent to him by post or transmitted by broadcasting is maintained in three ways:

(1) The new student is linked in his first year of study to the University by a single person based at his local study centre (his tutor-counsellor).

(2) This person maintains contact with the student throughout his years of study in what would otherwise be a highly impersonal university (the tutor-counsellor in his purely counselling role for post-foundation students).

(3) In the more complex post-foundation courses the students' work will be monitored and this TMAs assessed by highly qualified specialist academics distributed throughout the United Kingdom. (The tutor of a post-foundation course.)

There would be one or more for each of the thirteen OU regions for courses with high enrolments; perhaps as few as two for the whole of the country for courses with very low enrolments.

4. PRESENT PROVISION

In 1979 for the ninth intake of students the RTS, under the direction of Robert Beevers assisted by David Grougeon and David Sewart, comprised 13 regional offices, 260 local study centres, about 300 full-time academic staff, 2,176 part-time student counsellors and 4,000 part-time tutors. Student support services consumed over 25% of the OU's annual grant from the Department of Education and Science. The nine major aspects of the 1979 structure are outlined below:

RTS Central Staff

At Milton Keynes the RTS presence is quite small, approximately 18 people. This includes the director, two assistant directors, four other academics with responsibilities for handicapped students, research officers and administrators. The OU journal, *Teaching at a Distance* is edited from this office.

Regional Offices

For administrative purposes the OU has divided the UK into 13 regions, each of which has a central regional office in an important city.

Regional Offices •

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FIGURE 2. REGIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

Source: Adapted from The Open University. Further Particulars for Part-time Tutorial and counselling staff, 1979

Each of these operations is headed by a regional director, paid at professorial level. The regional offices are administrative centres to which students are not usually invited. They have full-time academic staff, administrators and secretaries, a computer terminal linked to the central computer at Milton Keynes, a library and audio-visual store.

Study Centres

Each regional office is responsible for about 20 study centres. These are usually a series of lecture-rooms, meeting rooms and offices hired from a local College of Further Education or College of Technology. The centres are open to students most nights of the week and sometimes at weekends for tutorials, group discussions and informal meetings.

Staff Tutors

The co-ordination and supervision of tuition at the Open University is undertaken by staff tutors. Each of the University's six faculties, Arts, Social Science, Mathematics, Science, Technology, and Education has at least one staff tutor in each region.

A staff tutor is appointed with responsibilities to the Dean of the Faculty at Milton Keynes and to a Regional Director in one of the regional offices where he will be the faculty's representative 'on the ground'. He has five main functions:

- to organise day schools, field trips and other activities for the students in his region enrolled in all the courses run by his faculty
- to organise tutorials either in the evenings or on Saturday mornings at the local study centres
- to recruit, interview and appoint part-time staff
- to check on the accuracy and consistency of the marking of TMAs in his subjects and monitor this marking against the national average
- to send to Milton Keynes information on the success of learning materials and the teaching strategies proposed by the course team when the course was being designed (proposed frequency of tutorials, whether these were optional or compulsory, style and frequency of assignments etc.)

Staff tutor is a challenging and influential position at the Open University. There can be tremendous pressures as the staff tutor has two masters: the Dean of his Faculty and his Regional Director. A vast amount of travelling is necessary as the staff tutor has two homes - the central office at Milton Keynes and his own office, which might be in Scotland. There are important educational possibilities as the staff tutor sees the whole range of students' work, organises activities for them and is responsible for the accuracy and quality of the assessment of their work. As most of the part-time tutors with whom the staff tutor deals are university and college academics who lecture full-time in their subjects to conventional undergraduate students, diplomacy as well as organisational and academic skills are needed.

Senior Counsellors

Each regional office has between four and six senior counsellors who are each responsible for the progress of an average of 1,300 students and for maintaining contact with and guiding about 35 local tutor-counsellors. Their responsibilities lie in the areas of student problems and drop-outs, disabled students, choice of courses, vocational guidance, extra time for assignments, summer school attendance.

An important role of the senior counsellors is to assist part-time staff in adapting to their role in the Open University system. Although normally this role extends only to aiding and supporting tutor-counsellors in their counselling role with students, they have often a more general supportive role to staff as well. This arises from the tensions inherent in the OU teaching system.

For many OU tutors their full-time teaching occupation is their major interest. However, if they teach at a College of Technical or Further Education and not at a university there can be more status in the OU work. For nearly all of them teaching with the OU is the first time they have ever been checked in their academic work, the first time their written comments on students' work has been monitored, or their teaching has been observed.

The tension of teaching someone else's material and being monitored for doing it can be very real. There are those tutors who react with hostility to the course material, those who are critical of it - though this can be stimulating to the brighter student. There is the boredom of teaching, say, course A100 for the fifth year running, as very little turn-over of part-time staff occurs in the employment situation of 1979.

The senior counsellors deal mainly with the exceptional student problems which are referred to them by the tutor-counsellors. They have nonetheless, the responsibility for all students to ensure that they are taught how to learn at a distance, how to become independent learners, when to question the course material, how to cope with the OU bureaucracy and what services are available to those who consider dropping out.

Tutor-Counsellors

Each tutor-counsellor is usually responsible for the

- correspondence tuition
- face-to-face tuition
- counselling

of a group of students in one foundation level course (either Arts or Science or Technology or Social Science or Mathematics) based at one study centre, plus counselling only for a group of post-foundation level students (most of whom are known from previous years).

The normal allocation is twelve foundation-level students (decreasing to nine as some first year students drop-out) and eighteen post-foundation level students. Payments are as follows:

Flat rate fee (paid to all tutors)		£ 77·71
Marking TMAs (assume 9 students submit 7 of the 10 assignments in the course @ £3·240 each)		£205·38
Tutorials (assume 40 contact hours per year) at £7·77 per hour		£310·83
Fees for special sessions (student induction, extra sessions for weak students) at £7·30 per hour—assume 6		£ 43·80
		£637·72
Plus: 1 Briefing session as tutor @ £7·57		£ 7·57
1 Briefing session as counsellor @ £7·57		£ 7·57
Postage, stationery, etc. for assignments at 26p each (63 assignments)	£ 16.38	£ 16 38
Expenses incurred in counselling	£ 29·90	£ 29·90
Travelling expenses	As incurred	
		£61·42
TOTAL	£699.14	plus travelling

Source Adapted from Further particulars for part-time tutorial and counselling staff, 1979

FIGURE 3. PAYMENT TO A101 TUTOR COUNSELLOR

There are 2,176 tutor-counsellors at the time of writing and their role as counsellor begins even before new students start studying at the OU. In theory it continues throughout the student's career at the OU, an average of six years, and concludes with the tutor-counsellor's advice and assistance in job change or placement after graduation.

The Open University academic year begins on 1 February. By November of the previous year the tutor-counsellor receives a listing of his allocation of new students together with a copy of the students' application forms. He immediately looks for students

- whose study problems will be most acute
- whose previous study is inappropriate
- who are disabled
- who cannot attend the study centre

and sets up an induction meeting to establish contact with the students and give them an opportunity to get to know each other as a group. There are occasions, of course, when such a session prior to the start of the academic year can backfire and students may find their first contact with the tutor-counsellor off-putting and may decide not to pursue their course.

In early February the students receive their first study materials and the B.B.C. starts to transmit the broadcast programmes. Most tutor-counsellors hold weekly tutorial sessions at the study centre and these are particularly important during the student's foundation courses. It is difficult and probably unnecessary to make a distinction between 'tutorial' and 'counselling' sessions at this level.

The tutor-counsellor is available to the student on a fairly regular basis at the study centre, he teaches both course content and study skills at the tutorials, he maintains contact with students by correspondence and telephone, he marks and assesses the students' TMAs and comments on them and keeps records of the students' progress.

As a counsellor he enables the students to become acquainted with the OU's complex administrative procedures, seeks to develop the skills of studying at a distance and of seeing the inter-relationship between the various elements of the OU's teaching package, provides individual support for 'high-risk' students, seeks to organise study groups and advises students on the choice of further courses.

The tutor-counsellor is the basis of the local support for the student and gives a presence to the Open University which could otherwise be seen as a faceless teaching bureaucracy. He is the clearest example of that 'continuity of concern' for students in a distance learning system that is the centre of the RTS philosophy.

The philosophy may be summed up as: to help students to become independent but not isolated learners and to reduce to an acceptable minimum the number of drop-outs. As a counselling service it is interventionist but non-clinical. It seeks to identify problems and then intervene to prevent them having a harmful effect. It remains at all times educational counselling and refers psychiatric problems to specialists in that field.

Course Tutors

At the time of writing the OU employs nearly 4,000 course tutors almost exclusively at post-foundation level. They are allocated 20 students each but the average number handled works out at 16.5 because of late changes in students' plans and drop-outs. Normally they reside within the region in which they work but inter-regional appointments are made where the course enrolment is less than 20.

The tutor's role is to undertake correspondence tuition (assess and comment on TMAs), face-to-face tuition (evening tutorials, Saturday meetings and summer-schools) and at-a-distance tuition (by correspondence and telephone) of their group of students. Many will reside at quite considerable distances from their students.

Computerisation

The Regional Tutorial Services, quite apart from the central administration of the University, uses an impressive range of computerised data in its service to students and there is every indication that this will be further developed in the near future.

Each of the thirteen regional offices has a computer terminal linked to the one in the RTS Central Office at Milton Keynes with both display and print-out facilities on which the record of each student can be examined in five seconds. A comprehensive record of each student's programme is held including all information from the application form, results of all TMAs and CMAs and compliance with OU administrative procedures: payment of fees, attendance at summer school and application for the following year.

Each tutor-counsellor, whose role, as has been said, is to monitor the progress of up to 35 students throughout their university career, gets from the computer detailed information on each student allocated to him, plus a cumulative listing of grades in both TMAs and CMAs every two weeks. In addition regular listings of whether or not his students have complied with administrative procedures, and, twice per year, print-outs of conditional registration information are sent to the tutor-counsellors. They receive also a copy of every PT3[9] form for every one of their students whose TMAs they do not mark themselves.

Each staff tutor is responsible for the teaching of his faculty's course within his region and each Regional Office receives at regular intervals a listing of the progress of all students, which the staff tutor can use for monitoring and other purposes. A listing of the progress of all students in his subjects in student number order is also available. In addition, he receives for each TMA a kosmat analysis (see below) which shows the marking of all the tutors in the country on that course, with the average mark for that TMA and indications as to which tutors mark above or below this mark and the consistency of each tutor.

Kosmat Analysis

A kosmat analysis is a computerised weighting of all the marks awarded by one tutor on a particular assignment against the marks awarded by all the other tutors who are marking that subject.

OPEN UNIVERSITY D P DIVISION TUTOR-MARKED ASSIGNMENTS

20/05/78 FORMAT ANALYSIS OF TUTOR GRADES FOR REGION 01 PAGE 1

COURSE S 100

TUTOR	ASSIGNMENT 01 TR9	8	7&6	5	4&3	2-0	MAX. PROP. DIFF	SIG.	UP TO & INCL 01 TR9	8	7&6	5	4&3	2-0	MAX. PROP. DIFF	SIG.	NO. ASS
202004 SMITH																	
NO OF SCRPTS	8	5	2	1	0	0	+.3%	***	8	5	2	1	0	0	+.3%	***	1
AS A PERCENT	50%	31%	13%	6%	0%	0%			50%	31%	13%	6%	0%	0%			
451520 BROWN																	
NO OF SCRPTS	5	4	2	1	0	0	+.3%		5	4	2	1	0	0	+.3%		1
AS A PERCENT	42%	33%	17%	8%	0%	0%			42%	33%	17%	8%	0%	0%			

TOTALS OF ALL TUTOR SCRIPTS

COURSE S 100

	ASSIGNMENT 01 TR9	8	7&6	5	4&3	2-0	MAX. PROP DIFF	SIG.	UP TO & INCL 01 TR9	8	7&6	5	4&3	2-0
TOTAL NO OF SCRPTS	476	845	1369	282	88	23			476	845	1369	282	88	23
TOTAL AS A PERCENT	16%	27%	44%	9%	3%	1%			16%	27%	44%	9%	3%	1%

Example of Kosmat Analysis

FIGURE 24

Source: Adapted from Teaching at a Distance, 4, 14.

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It is highly important for a university which is preparing university students for nationally recognised bachelor's degrees by correspondence to be able to guarantee the consistency and accuracy of its assessment procedures to its students, its staff and the academic community. The OU, as has been stated, employs up to 6,000 part-time tutors who teach and assess learning from materials produced by the course teams at Milton Keynes.

The kosmat analysis gives the staff-tutor an accurate picture of the consistency of each tutor, of his relationship to the other tutors marking that subject and can be used for compensation at the end of the year to any group of students who have been marked inconsistently or harshly. From the kosmat analysis rates of monitoring are established by the RTS indicating to the staff tutor the number of assignments per tutor he has to check: these vary with the tutor's experience and the consistency of his marking.

5. CRITIQUE

Secret of the OU's Success?

There are two bases for the philosophy which has led to the present structure of the RTS. Firstly the university's preoccupation with the drop-out problem and its determination to solve it. 'It is essential to do everything to forestall demoralisation and consequent 'drop-out' in a distance teaching system' is the unequivocal instructions the RTS gives to its staff in *Teaching for the Open University* (1977: 9).

Secondly what Sewart calls a 'continuity of concern for students in a system of learning at a distance'.

The complex yet flexible structure which the RTS has developed to assist students is the most efficient distance system yet provided. To the correspondence-type learning materials, texts and readers, television broadcasts, radio broadcasts, and - on occasion - laboratory kits, audio tapes, radiovision kits, slidepacks and computer simulations developed by the course teams at Milton Keynes, it adds an impressive organisation of regional offices, study centres, tutor-counsellors, course tutors, evening and Saturday tutorials, laboratory/field sessions, summer schools, replay and group discussion possibilities, tuition by telephone, computer-based record systems, kosmat analyses and student social organisations. Most of these facilities are optional, unless the course team has indicated the contrary.

I feel that in many ways the RTS is the secret of the OU's success. It prevents avoidable drop-outs, assists students toward graduation and guarantees the quality of learning in the OU system.

As this paper has shown it is a system that has evolved with the university and will continue to do so.

Some Difficulties

- The RTS costs money; not many distance education systems have many millions of pounds available annually for student related services. In the case of the OU money seems well spent.

- The terminology used by the OU for its part-time staff: 'tutor' and 'tutor-counsellor' is cumbersome, though this paper has shown the evolution of these terms in the OU's teaching strategy.

- The role of the part-time staff has been the subject of compromise and there are areas in which one can query the present system:

(i) The system has already broken down in the area that is most important to the average student: the authorisation to submit a TMA later than the cut-off date. *Teaching for the Open University* (1977: 36) states 'The requirement (is) that a student, who wants to submit an assignment late, must have the tutor-counsellor's authorisation to do so'. This has had to be changed and from the beginning of 1979 it is the tutor who marks the assignment who grants this authorisation. This is a sensible change.

(ii) Contact between the tutor-counsellor and students who have advanced through a number of years at the OU is rare; much depends on the quality of the part-time staff member.

(iii) The role of the tutor-counsellor in the foundation year courses as both counsellor and marker of assignments causes problems for the student who may want to query the grades received.

- The interventionist approach of OU counselling is queried by some but the RTS position is quite clearcut:

> 'Even before students begin their course the tutor-counsellor has a responsibility for assessing individual strengths and weaknesses. This is not merely a passive assessment. He has an interventionist role and it is through the counselling function that the University's flexible resources will be directed to those students who appear to be most urgently in need.' (Sewart, 1978: 14)

• Where the OU teaches at a large distance, as in Scotland, students in the country can be disadvantaged in the amount of tutorial time available to them. This is in spite of dispositions that can be made by the Regional Office to subsidise country students and provide vouchers for free telephone calls to those who cannot attend tutorials without the expense of an overnight stay in a hotel near the study centre.

The Future

The management of RTS has already developed its planning for extensive refinements to its student support system and the three major thrusts of this development are:

(1) The allocation of a group of students to a tutor-counsellor even earlier than at present, perhaps in March prior to the commencement of the academic year eleven months later. This is to counteract student drop-out between the acceptance of a place offered (September at present) and the start of the course (February). This plan might be counter-productive if the initial contact between prospective student and counsellor was not harmonious.

(2) The provision of packages of bridging study materials and 'how to study' courses in the months prior to the commencement of the academic year. The proportion of students enrolled at the OU who have not got university entrance qualifications reached 42% in 1979 and this group of poorly qualified students has increased study skills problems.

(3) Refinement of the computerised student record system both from the input and retrieval aspects. The new system has been developed by Sewart, Assistant Director of RTS, who describes the benefits as follows:

> The major benefits of the proposed new system will arrive only with the completion of the data base system and the uprating of the present main frame capacity. Through this system it will be possible for full-time staff in regional offices to have access not only to individual student information but also to activity based information or 'exception data'. Thus regional offices will have a facility for listing students who have a problem in relation to their progress without recourse to clerical procedures. The pre-determined subsets of information will embrace those activities which are known to hinder student progress - students with a recent fail grade, student who have not received their first choice of courses and students taking combinations of courses which are known to have a heavy workload are obvious examples. (1978: 18)

This change from the holding of individual student information on a computer tape system to a data-based system with real time updating by 1980 will enable the RTS to refine even more its 'continuity of concern' for the students studying at a distance at the OU.

The input facilities in the regional offices will enable local information to be added to the computerised data and the print-out facilities can be used to transmit data on students with serious study problems to the local tutor-counsellors for immediate action. (Sewart, 1979: 346-351; 1980: 171-187)

Rather than trying to analyse why students drop-out from a distance education system the RTS may be able to forecast those who are in danger of dropping out and take preventative action.

The history of the RTS is a fascinating story of the attempts of an education system to use to maximum efficiency the available financial and human resources and advances in technology for the benefit of students in a distance learning system.

If the present developments in computerisation are successful and it proves possible for the system to forecast potential drop-outs, then the RTS will have made a major step towards solving the central problem of any distance education system: the prevention of avoidable drop-outs.

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